



Visited a poison garden lately?

Most people, when they think 'garden', think flowers, greenery and something generally relaxing. There is one type of garden that will change your thinking. Here you will find some of the deadliest plants in the world: from belladonna (deadly nightshade) to tobacco plants, this garden is not for the timid!

A poison garden harks back to medieval times when witches or apothecaries knew the potential of innocent-looking but toxic fungi, shrubs and creepers. In a modern poison garden some plants are kept in cages.

The cultivation of most of the varieties of dangerous plants is not difficult—venomous plants, like weeds, tend to grow prolifically, and many of them also produce vivid flowers, leaf patterns and coloured fruit or pods.

In Australia, a number of very poisonous weeds grow on our roadsides. Farmers with stock know the ones that can kill farm animals. There are even varieties of poisonous shrubs anyone can buy from a plant nursery, such as oleanders.

Throughout history, literature has provided example upon example of plant poisons being used for foul deeds. Hemlock, we know, was (mis) used in ancient Greece. Socrates died from its poison. It causes sudden physical deterioration and death. During that short time the mind is fully functioning. The person is fully aware of his or her condition! Henbane is thought to have been the main ingredient in the poison Romeo took in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

A poison garden has great educational value. It lets us see into our history and understand literature, and it preserves valuable, local knowledge—the alternative name for bryony (a creeper-like plant with tendrils) is 'death warrant'. As an educational garden full of mystery and intrigue, a poison garden is a place to hear ancient plant lore and learn about the dangers and benefits of plants. Such gardens are also a natural resource for programs on other aspects of health, diet, history, heritage and gardening.

If you are thinking of growing a poison garden you will need government approval for the more exotic plants and there are many, many conditions attached.